

I am writing this piece in order to bring to the attention of your readership an undervalued yet mission critical program called the Marine Corps Congressional Fellowship. While the fellowship is a long established program, it was not until General Jim Jones took over as the 32<sup>nd</sup> CMC that Marines truly utilized this opportunity. Prior to this, few Marines, if any, were sent to fill these positions. Now it is one of the most challenging and prized fellowships in the Corps for both military and civilians.

By design, the fellowship exposes military officers and government civilians to the inner workings of the United States Congress. It is open to the Marine ranks of Captain and Major, any MOS, and Civilian Marine ranks of GS-12 and above. The program is a year long, from roughly October one year to December of the next, and is accomplished in three phases. First comes the on-the-job training phase, where the fellow is exposed to the organization of the Marine Corps Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA). Included in this phase are rotations in both the House and Senate Liaison offices on Capital Hill. Usually the incoming fellow is placed with an exiting fellow so that they can learn about how a congressional office operates.

Additionally, the incoming fellow will spend some time in the Special Correspondence branch of OLA. The importance and challenge in this section cannot be overstated, as they respond to over 4,800 Congressional inquiries per year. These inquiries range over a wide spectrum of issues, and have on occasion greatly aided fellow Marines and their families.

After one to two months of on-the-job training, the fellows move to the government orientation program. This is a two and a half week program that gives an intensive overview on the organization of Congress. And on how a bill becomes an act of congress (made law), and many other aspects of the legislative branch.

The faculty of Georgetown's Government Affairs Institute (GAI) is contracted by the U. S. Government to teach the program. Courses are available throughout the year of which a fellow can take advantage. Specific subjects include Testimony Preparation, the Appropriation/Authorization process, the Congressional Committee Process, and many other topics concerning the Legislative Branch of government. Of particular interest to fellows is the Certificate in Legislative Affairs. While not required by the program, the opportunity to pursue this certificate free of cost is seldom passed up.

The ultimate intent of the program is realized when fellows take on staffer positions in the third phase of the program. Fellows are interviewed and selected by a Congressional office, either House or Senate, to perform the duties of a full-fledged staff member. Most often, an office's Military Legislative Assistant (MLA) utilizes the fellow's knowledge and understanding of military matters. Almost all fellows serve in an office of a member who sits on a military related committee or subcommittee, such as the House (or Senate) Armed Services Committee (HASC and SASC) or the House Appropriations Committee-Subcommittee on Defense (HAC-D). These committees have jurisdiction over aspects of policy or budget for the Department of Defense. Fellows can observe up close how language is crafted into bills that eventually become laws (statutes) via the committee process, and other experience other fascinating aspects of politics on Capital Hill.

It is within these offices that fellows can learn the most, as well as support the member to their fullest ability. Almost immediately upon introduction into a member's office, the fellow becomes an integral member of the official staff. Duties are challenging and dynamic, including crafting legislative language, drafting questions for members to pose at hearings, building coalition on matters of national importance, and serving as subject matter experts on all

things relating to the Department of Defense. Some fellows may even travel on Congressional or Staff delegations, which are fact-finding trips on various issues, ranging from military construction to researching environmental encroachment on training ranges. Each fellowship is unique and different, but all are ensured a challenging, eventful, and worthwhile tenure.

Fellows truly benefit Congress in unique ways. The currency of their service makes them duty experts on any number of issues. Most permanent office staff have not served in any capacity. While some members have served, the majority have not, and of those that have served, their currency has long expired. It is essential that the one institution that is charged by the Constitution to determine the funding levels of the Department of Defense, as well as which programs are funded or eliminated, have competent professionals working for key members giving sound, useful, and informed advice. Marine Corps Congressional Fellows provide just this type of service. By aiding members of Congress in this capacity, fellows benefit the Marine Corps, as well as the Department of Defense as a whole, through their capable knowledge and support.

After the fellowship is completed, the Marine has an opportunity to apply his experience and newfound expertise immediately. As directed by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, exiting fellows must perform a "payback" tour (also known as a utilization tour). This tour cannot be deferred but immediately follows the fellowship. Several areas are possible for the payback tour, such as budgeting or policy making at Aviation or Plans, Policy and Operations, or a tour at OLA itself. A fellow's newly acquired skill set pays dividends to the Marine Corps immediately. Just as important, however, are the dividends it pays in a Marine's career. The Marine Corps Congressional Fellowship is an exciting and challenging way for Marines and Civilian Marines to apply their talents for the benefit of the Corps.

If you are interested, a Marine Administration (MARADMIN) message posts on the Marine Corps' web site in the January/February time frame. It will outline candidate qualifications as well as the application process. Good luck and Semper Fidelis!